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What's Calling You Now?

A summer weekend brings Furman faculty, staff and alumni together to examine their lives, work and beliefs.

By KEVIN SPEARS

I rounded the curve under that cool, green canopy of leaves and drove through Furman's front gate. I passed the first fountain and followed signs directing me to the check-in for student housing. I collected my keys and meal card and, with equal parts curiosity and reluctance, went off to meet my new roommates.

I am not a Furman freshman and haven't been for almost 20 years now. But on that August day, I and 25 other alumni who graduated between 1975 and 1995 were arriving on campus to be students again. Over the next three days we would live in student housing, eat in the PalaDen, listen to lectures and say to ourselves periodically, "You know what? It is a beautiful campus."

We had chosen to take part in a program sponsored by Furman's Center for Theological Exploration of Vocation titled "What's Calling You Now?" — the first retreat for alumni hosted by the center.

Since January of 2000 the CTEV has engaged faculty, staff and students in projects, retreats, workshops and conversations that pose the question, "How do your most deeply held beliefs shape your personal, professional and public lives?" Ann Quattlebaum, center coordinator, and professors Elaine Nocks and David Bost, co-directors, have been the instigators of these programs, and they decided that it was time to ask the same questions of alumni.

Professionally speaking, we were a diverse group. There were the usual ones — a doctor, a lawyer, a salesperson, several teachers, a professor or two. And there were a few surprises — a pilot, a radio producer, an officer in the Army Reserve, a tuberculosis specialist for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

We also had a variety of reasons for being there. Some came seeking help in making pressing decisions in their personal or professional lives. Some came just because they enjoy these kinds of conversations. Others came to be with friends.

The retreat was organized around three components: thematic workshops, lectures by Furman faculty and staff, and small group discussions. In the workshops, Ann and Elaine illuminated the notion of vocation — the idea that everyone has a calling — by turning a different facet

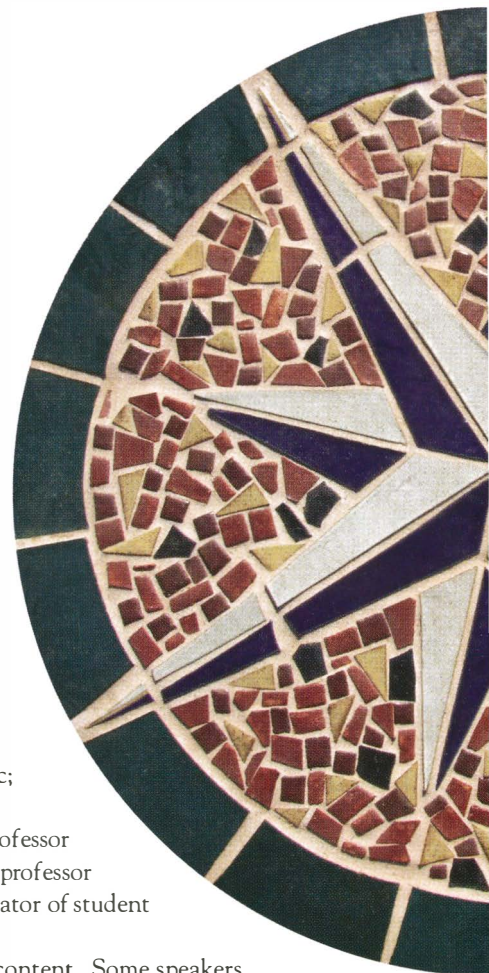
to the light in each workshop. They showed how one's vocation can be expressed in work, in relationships, and through faith and spirituality. In the small groups we turned these facets in our own hands and listened to each other make sense of vocation in our own lives.

But the master lectures were the real highlights. Over three days, five current and former professors and one longtime staff member offered their individual interpretations of vocation as it has been expressed in their disciplines, careers and lives. They were Albert Blackwell, retired professor of religion; Bruce Schoonmaker, professor of music; Jim Leavell, recently retired professor of history/Asian Studies; Don Aiesi, professor of political science; Helen Lee Turner, professor of religion; and Carol Daniels, coordinator of student services.

Each lecture differed in style and content. Some speakers brought carefully crafted notes, while others threw a leg over the front of a desk and talked informally. Some discussed the paths that brought them to Furman, showing how lives become stories with meaning as time passes. Some spoke from their academic disciplines, offering wisdom on vocation — on being fully human. All of them spoke very personally.

Furman has long been the kind of institution where professors and staff could be open and human with students, but this was a different type of encounter for us. They were not only making sense for us of what they know, but of who they are and have been.

The impact was powerful. This was evident in the earnest conversations that followed in the coffee breaks and in the way we lingered around the speakers, drawing out more of their stories and telling our own. And it was evident in the questions the lectures provoked. On the first night, following lectures by professors Blackwell and Schoonmaker on living an authentic life, the first question posed to them was, "What do you do when you know what it is you are called to do, but you just can't bring yourself to do it?"





This came from someone with immediate and pressing concerns about profession and calling. But even those of us who attended the retreat out of passing interest or curiosity could not elude our own “big questions” as we made our way to Sunday. In our last discussion groups on Sunday morning, it seemed that everyone had arrived at a place of deep contemplation on the question of vocation.

Unless you have been an undergraduate at Furman at some point during the last 10 years, being back on campus can be a disorienting experience. Buildings occupy the once grassy expanses between the library, Furman Hall and Plyler Hall. Fine wood paneling and carpeted floors have replaced the old cinder block and linoleum in Furman Hall, and Plyler Hall is an empty shell awaiting similar treatment. The dining hall now has mezzanine seating, open kitchen stations and an Einstein Bros. Bagels.

But most baffling by far is the student center, or the University Center as it is called today. You still enter the building from the same direction but, to one who has fond memories of the green shag risers in Burgess Lounge (which no longer exists) and the Eisenhower-era post office, all other vestiges of the past have been erased.

I mentioned this over lunch to John Harris '91, a professor of mathematics at Furman and a retreat participant. He gave me an insider tip: To get re-oriented, he said, I should go into the men's room on the ground floor. A couple of moments there and I would be able to perceive the phantom outline of the old student center. “Except for the new stall dividers,” he said, “they haven't changed a thing in there.”

As one might expect from a mathematician, he was right on the money. I stepped into that tucked-away corner of the building for a moment and, when I walked out, I could almost feel the old, familiar student center take shape around me, and I knew where I was standing in the new one.

As strange as the analogy may be — and despite the rarity

of restrooms in theological and philosophical discourse — John's suggestion turned out to be emblematic of the weekend.

Like the campus, none of us looks exactly as we did 15, 20 or 30 years ago. We have all had our additions and renovations — spouses, children, houses, advanced degrees, careers, career changes, dead-ends, compromises and new directions. And as the manifestations of our personal, professional and public lives have accrued and unfolded over time, it is not uncommon for us to look around and ask ourselves, “Where am I?” — to be disoriented in our lives, or perhaps to wonder if we can take a look at the blueprints.

During the retreat, Ann and Elaine offered us an insider tip, suggesting that we delve into some tucked away corners of ourselves where we haven't changed a thing — down to our beliefs, our values, our deep desires, our best dreams — and then, having spent a little time with them, to emerge and perceive the original form in the current structure.

On the last page of the retreat agenda was a line that read, “Three questions to keep in mind.” They were short and simple, but there was an enormity in their brevity. They were:

Who am I?

What do I believe?

What does the world need?

To get some sense of what the alumni retreat was like, carry these questions around in your head or heart for three days. You just may find yourself doing a little theological exploration of vocation of your own.

The one thing I am sorry to report is that the alumni retreat will not be offered again until the summer of 2008. But contact Ann Quattlebaum at ann.quattlebaum@furman.edu or at (864) 294-2511 if you would be interested in taking part in a weekend like the one I have described. If interest in a 2007 retreat is strong enough, Furman might feel called to offer it again. ^{1F1}

For more on the Center for Theological Exploration of Vocation, visit the Web at www.furman.edu/lilly. Author Kevin Spears '92 is a regional director with the Fund for Theological Education, an Atlanta-based organization that advocates excellence and diversity in pastoral ministry and theological scholarship.